



NEWS RELEASE

EUROPE REGIONAL MEDICAL COMMAND

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What you don't know can hurt you

STIs not always visible to the naked eye

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HEIDELBERG - You're at the club enjoying a night on the town. A good-looking stranger catches your eye. You dance the night away laughing and getting to know one another. One thing leads to another and you wake up the next morning with the beautiful stranger from the night before. But there is a hitch. Not only did that stranger catch your eye, you caught something far worse, a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI).

Sexually Transmitted Infections include a variety of infections that are usually contracted through sexual intercourse or other intimate sexual contact (i.e., oral sex). These include Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes and HIV, to name a few.

"Abstinence is the only 100 percent sure way to protect you against STIs," said Kimberly Jeffery-Wolfert, public health nurse, Heidelberg Army Community Hospital. "Many other things will help protect you as well to include consistent condom use and limiting your amount of partners."

April is National STI Awareness month. While considerable progress has been made in preventing, diagnosing, and treating certain STIs in recent years, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that 19 million new infections occur each year, almost half of them among young people ages 15 to 24.

"Condoms must be used consistently and correctly in order to protect people," said Jeffery-Wolfert. "So often in our line of work clients tell us that they 'sometimes' or 'usually' use them, but their lack of 100 percent usage is what gets them."

Knowing and communicating with your partner is another way to protect yourself against the spread of STIs.

“Always have protected sex,” said Capt. Bonnie Jeanice, public health nurse, Heidelberg Army Community Hospital. “Always know your partner before you have sex. You cannot chance it. There is always that risk that there are other things (STIs) going on. You don’t want to risk your life or your partner’s life. STIs are not discriminating. A person can be the healthiest or best-looking person out there and have an STI. You just don’t know.”

“Having mutual testing done prior to an intimate relationship is the only true way to know your partner. They often don’t realize that they are infectious because they have no signs or symptoms,” said Jeffery-Wolfert, adding that the two leading STIs among young people are Chlamydia and (the) human papillomavirus (HPV).

When used consistently and correctly, male latex condoms are effective in preventing the sexual transmission of HIV infection and can reduce the risk for other STIs (such as gonorrhea, Chlamydia, and trichomoniasis), according to the publication *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR), Vol. 51.

But keep in mind that condoms do not cover all exposed areas; therefore, they are likely to be more effective in preventing STIs spread by fluids (gonorrhea, Chlamydia, trichomoniasis, and HIV) than in preventing those spread by skin-to-skin contact (herpes simplex virus, HPV, and syphilis), according to the report. Individuals with no visible symptoms can transmit viruses by skin-to-skin contact, which is usually the case with HPV.

“If Soldiers or family members would like to see the briefing it starts at 9:30 a.m. every Thursday at the Inprocessing Training Center located at the PX Shopping Center in Heidelberg,” said Jeffery-Wolfert. “They must register first by calling the wellness center (commercial 06221.17.2706 or DSN 371.2706) as there are limited seats. The objective of the class is to provide training and increase awareness,” she said.

Recently, Jeffery-Wolfert and Jeanice gave a class to members of the 2 -502nd Aviation Regiment in Mannheim. Officers and enlisted members of all ages (both single and married) attended the yearly training. Throughout the class, both nurses took time to answer a number of questions.

The STI class given by the public health nurse is one of the required briefings for new USAREUR Soldiers during inprocessing, and annual training.

“This class is excellent and offers good, educational material,” said Chief Warrant Officer Christopher Ferguson, unit projects officer. “It is good for everybody, not just those under age 25 who are considered the high-risk group, but for everybody,” he said. “It is beneficial for those young Soldiers coming in from the outside world where they are not involved in an organized community. Now they are in a structured environment where the educational material is available to them.”

Finding information about STIs is as easy as visiting your public health nurse, or logging onto one of the Web sites listed below. Military members and their families living and working in Heidelberg can contact the wellness center and the public health nursing department at 06221.17.2706 or DSN 371.2706.

Do not be fooled by a person's attractive, clean appearance or the fact that neither of you show any noticeable signs or symptoms of an STI. There is the chance that one of you may have been exposed to an STI and are not aware of it.

Most people think they would know if they had an STI – but in fact, many of these infections are silent. Several of the most common STIs have no signs or symptoms in the majority of people infected, according to the American Social Health Association.

Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/std

American Social Health Association (ASHA)
www.ashastd.org

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Note: The following list is provided by the American Social Health Association. There are over 15 STIs. Some cause symptoms and some do not, some are curable and some are not. These are the leading STIs among teens and young adults. For more information on STIs visit the ASHA web site at: <http://www.ashastd.org>.

Chlamydia – This is the most common bacterial STI in the United States with about three million new cases every year. Chlamydia usually does not produce visible signs or symptoms, but it can damage a woman's reproductive organs, leading to infertility and chronic pain. Chlamydia is so common that health care providers are supposed to test every sexually active woman under age 26 at least once a year. You should test more often if you have new or multiple sex partners. The screening is important because of the lack of symptoms. Check with your doctor to make sure you have been tested for Chlamydia. If you have Chlamydia, your partner must also be treated to prevent him or her from spreading the infection back to you or to other partners.

Gonorrhea – Gonorrhea is similar to Chlamydia in that it is also a bacterial infection and it is common among teens and young adults. It is spread through sexual activity, but it is important to know that ejaculation does not have to occur for gonorrhea to be spread to a partner. Most women and many men will not notice any symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they can be mild and might include genital discharge, painful urination, or painful sex. Gonorrhea can lead to

serious complications in men and women (like infertility) if not treated in time. This infection is easily cured with antibiotics, but both partners will need to be treated to avoid re-infection.

Genital Herpes – About one in four people has genital herpes. However, 90 percent of these individuals do not know they have been infected. The main reason for this is that symptoms are mild and easily confused with a yeast infection, rash, ingrown hairs, a bug bite or irritation from sex. You can get genital herpes from genital-to-genital contact with a partner who has genital herpes or if a partner with a cold sore (oral herpes) performs oral sex on you. You may or may not need to be tested for herpes, but do not assume that such testing will be done automatically. Typically doctors do not test for herpes when testing for other STIs. There are several tests for herpes. Though there is no cure for herpes, it is a virus that lives in your body. Treatment can speed healing and reduce the number of outbreaks. Genital herpes can be passed to a partner even when there are no symptoms, but condoms and antiviral treatment reduce the risk.

HIV – HIV is a virus spread through contact with sexual fluids, blood, and breast milk. Over time, HIV can weaken the immune system to the point that it is unable to fight off other infections and may eventually lead to AIDS, but early detection and treatment can help. The only way to tell if you have HIV is to be tested for it. If you have had any type of STI, you are two to five times more likely to get HIV. Condoms are very effective at preventing transmission of HIV.

Trichomoniasis – Trichomoniasis is the most common curable STI in young women. Over seven million new cases occur each year in women and men. Most men with the infection do not have signs or symptoms. Some women may notice a smelly, yellow-green discharge. This infection is caused by a parasite, and both partners need to be treated at the same time to avoid re-infection.

HPV – HPV stands for human papillomavirus. Genital HPV is perhaps the most common of all STIs. Most adults have been exposed to HPV at some point but have cleared the infection. People are often surprised to learn this, considering many of them have never even heard of it. There are many types of HPV. Some types of HPV can result in genital warts (which are treatable), and some types can lead to an abnormal Pap smear result indicating cell changes on the cervix, a precursor to cervical cancer. This virus, while quite common, usually does not result in any signs or symptoms, and the immune system is thought to clear the infection over time for most people. Once women become sexually active, they should get regular Pap smears to ensure the cervix is healthy. If the cells are abnormal, a doctor may test for HPV to get more information. While HPV infection is a common virus that does not cause many problems. Cervical cancer is very serious and takes many years to develop. It can be diagnosed in its early stages through regular Pap smears.

Hepatitis B - Hepatitis B is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver. Chronic (long-lasting) hepatitis B can cause liver cell damage, which can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and cancer. This is the only STI that has a vaccine and can be prevented if you are properly vaccinated. It is estimated that 5,000 people die each year in the United States due to the complications of cirrhosis and liver cancer as a result of HBV.

Hepatitis C - Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). It is sometimes called non-A and non-B hepatitis. Hepatitis C is the most common chronic blood-borne infection in the United States and the leading cause of liver transplants. Fifteen to 45 percent of those infected with HCV are able to clear the virus from their blood within about six months from the time of infection. However, 55 to 85 percent of people with acute hepatitis C do not get rid of the virus within six months and therefore have chronic (long-term) hepatitis C. About 70 percent of chronically infected persons will develop chronic liver disease. Between one and five percent of chronically infected patients may die from chronic liver disease.

Syphilis - Syphilis is a bacterial infection marked by the appearance of single sore, also called a chancre, at the location where the bacterium entered the body. The sore lasts one- to five weeks and heals on its own, this leaves some people to believe that the problem has vanished with the sore and this can be a fatal mistake. Though the sore may be gone, the disease has advanced to the second stage. Symptoms include rashes, bumps, warts, and white patches on various parts of the body. If left untreated, this disease will damage the internal organs and nervous system. Condom use offers good protection against contracting syphilis. According to the Centers for Disease Control Syphilis continues to increase in men. The national rate of primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis – the early stages of the disease that indicate recent infection – has increased every year since an all-time low in 2000. From 2003 to 2004, the rate of P&S syphilis increased eight percent, from 2.5 to 2.7 cases per 100,000 population. The number of cases increased from 7,177 in 2003 to 7,980 in 2004.